

7-2010

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Original Publication Information

This article was originally published in *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, volume 10, issue 3, in 2010.

ThinkIR Citation

Detmering, Robert, "Exploring the political dimensions of information literacy through popular film." (2010). *Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 28.

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Robert Detmering

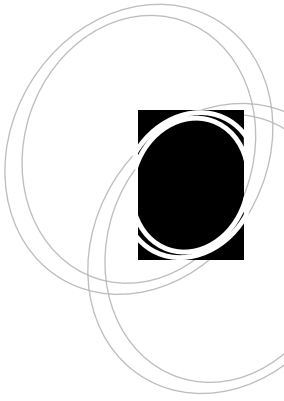
portal: Libraries and the Academy, Volume 10, Number 3, July 2010, pp. 265-282
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/pla.0.0110](https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.0.0110)



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Exploring the Political Dimensions of Information Literacy through Popular Film

Robert Detmering

abstract: Certain popular films contextualize the access, use, and interpretation of information within a political and social framework. As a result, these films function as alternative pedagogical sites for analysis and critique, facilitating critical thinking about information beyond the library and the classroom, and leading students to a deeper understanding of the fundamental need for information literacy. A conceptual basis for the consideration of film in politically engaged information literacy instruction is provided, supported by a discussion of three relevant films: Jason Reitman's *Thank You for Smoking* (2006), Joel and Ethan Coen's *Burn after Reading* (2008), and Oliver Stone's *W.* (2008).

Introduction

Arguing for a more expansive conception of information literacy that takes into account a diverse range of political, social, and economic contexts, Heidi Jacobs recently demonstrated that the goals and practices associated with information literacy have implications far beyond the library and the classroom, beyond conventional research papers and bibliographies.¹ While Jacobs does not mention popular culture as a locus for expanded political discussions, she, nevertheless, emphasizes information literacy's larger cultural dimensions and, in so doing, suggests that librarians approach information literacy with a more inclusive sensibility and a greater consideration for information contexts that fall outside the traditional realm of the academic library. As a representative area of popular culture studies, popular film provides one such context for a more inclusive, politically engaged approach to information literacy.

portal: Libraries and the Academy, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2010), pp. 265–282.

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Librarians have shown an interest in popular film, but the published literature on the topic has generally concentrated on cinematic representations of libraries and the profession of librarianship.² Although these publications have rightly encouraged librarians to

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consider their relationship to society and to engage with public perceptions of librarianship through cultural texts, they have not addressed portrayals of information literacy activities on screen. Perhaps this is because such portrayals are frequently

subtle and occur outside the institutional context of libraries. Most films have little to do with librarianship, per se; yet, on closer examination, they can offer compelling and unique frameworks for theoretical conversations about library-related issues, including information literacy. In particular, many films offer insight into those political and social components of information literacy that have become an increasingly prevalent part of discussions in the library literature. Vividly contextualizing the access, use, and interpretation of information in various settings, these films point toward a broader, more critical conception of information literacy in an accessible but powerful manner. As a result, films can spark interest in the political contexts of information and the structures of authority that regulate those contexts, helping librarians to introduce students to these complex and somewhat abstract topics and, at the same time, productively complicating how students think about information.

Three recent political and often satirical films—Jason Reitman’s *Thank You for Smoking* (2006), Joel and Ethan Coen’s *Burn after Reading* (2008), and Oliver Stone’s *W.* (2008)—encourage more extensive critical thinking about information literacy by foregrounding its political and social dimensions. Although each film problematizes the efficacy of information literacy against various political and ideological forces, all three reaffirm the value of a critical approach to information. More significantly, however, these films provide a meaningful context for information literacy activities. Through dramatic images of individuals and groups working with information in politically charged settings, they reflect David Barton and Mary Hamilton’s assertion that “literacies are positioned in relation to the social institutions and power relations which sustain them.”³ By contextualizing information use in this way, Reitman, the Coens, and Stone demystify information literacy’s relationship to the dynamics of power and politics. Thus, their respective films can lead students to a deeper understanding of the fundamental need for critical information literacy as well as what Jacobs calls the “complex situatedness of information literacy.”⁴ *Thank You for Smoking*, *Burn after Reading*, and *W.* indicate that popular culture, in general, and popular film, in particular, function as alternative pedagogical sites for analysis and critique in the classroom.



Critical Information Literacy and Popular Film

Many scholars in library and information science have argued for a more politically and socially engaged conception of information literacy that includes, but is not limited to, traditional educational settings. Christine Pawley, for instance, advocates a “critical approach to information literacy” that attends to the social context of information production and use.⁵ Indeed, information literacy cannot be adequately understood in isolation from political and social conditions because those very conditions gave rise to the term itself and continue to delineate how and why information literacy is taught and practiced today. As Pawley points out, information literacy is often presented as “essential for a successful adaptation to the rapid social and technical changes that we will all face.”⁶ This discourse of social emancipation clearly applies to the Association of College and Research Libraries’ *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, which highlight information literacy’s “broader implications for the individual, the educational system, and for society” and advance a mission to help people become “informed citizens and members of communities.”⁷ If such a mission is to be effective, however, librarians must develop pedagogies that promote student engagement with the cultural contexts of information literacy, those communities in which information is created and interpreted. Moreover, librarians must guide students toward a recognition of information literacy’s value to their lives, specifically its potential for political empowerment. The ability to evaluate information critically does not simply lead to stronger research papers; it offers a new way of thinking about the world and one’s place within it. The products of popular culture, including films, can form the basis for a pedagogy of empowerment that contextualizes information literacy in society and promotes discussions of its broader implications.

Some of the most intriguing arguments advocating a political vision of information literacy have originated with scholars in librarianship who have turned to recent work in literacy studies. In many respects, these scholars have been influenced by what James Paul Gee has called the “social turn” in literacy studies, a movement that emphasizes the role of “social and cultural interaction” in literacy activities.⁸ For example, James Elmborg criticizes research in information literacy that has inappropriately “separated students from social and economic contexts”; and, drawing on the scholarship of critical pedagogy, he argues for greater focus on the underlying political structures and relationships that control information access and use.⁹ As cultural texts, films reveal these structures and relationships of power and, thus, contribute to the realization of Elmborg’s pedagogical goals. Through the critical exploration of film, students not only engage in new ways with familiar cinematic contexts but also engage with representations of the social, political, and economic environments in which information literacy is practiced. In addition, because cinematic texts require critical interpretation and often refuse to provide easy answers to difficult questions, they enable librarians to acknowledge the genuine complexity of information literacy.

Explicitly echoing Elmborg’s discussion of the connections between current literacy studies and information literacy, Jacobs argues that “information literacy—like literacy—is not only educational but also inherently political, cultural, and social.”¹⁰ Following Elmborg, Jacobs asserts the importance of a contextualized approach. However, while



she rightly challenges librarians to incorporate into their perspectives the political domains in which information is utilized, Jacobs does not offer concrete strategies for accomplishing the “daunting task” of making information literacy education “relevant, engaged, embodied, situated, and social.”¹¹ Bringing the non-traditional format of popular film into the classroom, though, can meet the need Jacobs outlines for a non-traditional, socially engaged approach to instruction. While they may not immediately see the educational value of certain films, most students, regardless of age, are comfortable with and engaged by film, a culturally relevant medium ideal for developing the social engagement that Jacobs seeks. In simple terms, librarians can take the high level of engagement many students already have with popular film to new levels of critical awareness, from entertainment to education.

Though Dane Ward has argued for a more expansive pedagogy that incorporates images, music, and other creative works into information literacy instruction,¹² there has been limited discussion in the library literature regarding the use of films or other popular texts to foster political engagement. One exception is Elizabeth Friese, who argues that materials from popular culture can be used in school libraries to teach critical literacy skills.¹³ Beyond the school library, perhaps no one has argued more convincingly and passionately for the use of popular culture in the college information literacy classroom than Tara Brabazon. According to Brabazon, instructors should “facilitate a dynamic, energetic and relevant culture that encourages thought, debate and a dialogue with the time from which it emerges.”¹⁴ For Brabazon, popular culture becomes a relevant “thinking space” for information literacy, a catalyst for critical thinking.¹⁵ Following Brabazon’s lead, this discussion shows that films, as thinking spaces, inspire critical reflection on the role of information literacy in society. It builds on Brabazon’s ideas, however, by exploring how information literacy, itself, is represented in popular culture and how the social critiques mounted in certain films present opportunities for empowering discussions about information literacy’s political significance.

Outside the field of librarianship, scholars in many disciplines see film as a pathway to political engagement.¹⁶ In particular, composition scholars Bronwyn Williams and Amy Zenger have influenced the present discussion because their work reflects a convergence of film studies and literacy studies in which “movies represent and reproduce the ideological nature of literacy as a social phenomenon.”¹⁷ This assertion applies not only to traditional literacy (such as reading and writing) but also to information literacy, which is likewise a social phenomenon, characterized by the interaction of individuals and groups, creating and working with information in widely varying environments. These environments are necessarily structured by power relations; information literacy activities are inextricably tied to the larger political system, just as Elmborg and Jacobs assert. Similar to Williams and Zenger’s analysis of film, which “move[s] research beyond the classroom to consider how literacy develops and functions in different settings and domains of life,”¹⁸ the approach advanced herein broadens our understanding of the diverse and inevitably political contexts of information literacy, turning to cinematic representations that reveal information literacy’s implications in the so-called “real world.”

The lack of discussion in the library literature regarding the incorporation of film into instruction suggests that this approach is at odds with many librarians’ conception



of information literacy. In many cases, information literacy credit classes or instruction sessions teach students how to find reliable information that will shape their thinking and writing in terms of research-oriented course assignments. Given this model, popular film may seem out of place since most films, even those focusing on historical events, are works of narrative fiction. Such creative works might be considered irrelevant in the teaching of research methodologies; but stories, including cinematic narratives, connect intensely to our hearts and minds in ways that do not preclude critical thinking or other skills involved in information literacy. Instead, stories enhance these skills, encouraging new and more complex modes of thinking about information. As David Brier and Vickery Kaye Lebbin note, literary narratives “introduce students to deeper meanings about the value and need for information literacy.”¹⁹ Cinematic narratives similarly broaden the scope of the classroom conversation, bringing to light information literacy’s actual purpose within a complicated world.

The use of popular films in this manner may be most appropriate for semester-long information literacy courses in which time can be allocated for film showings and in-depth discussions. For example, after screening a film in class, the librarian might engage students in a discussion about how information literacy activities are represented in the narrative, how information influences particular events or characters, and how the film, as a whole, comments on the nature and value of information literacy. Students might even write essays on one or more of these topics, perhaps incorporating research that would illuminate issues raised in the film (for example, the portrayal of government agencies and institutions) or verify or challenge the filmmaker’s interpretation of historical events in a work such as Oliver Stone’s *W*. The librarian might also have students write analyses in which they compare representations of information literacy in a film shown in class to such representations in films of their own choosing. The goal of these kinds of assignments is to encourage critical and creative thinking about information as students draw connections between the information literacy skills they are developing in an academic setting and the ability to utilize information as active, critical participants in society.

Due to time constraints, librarians teaching a more limited number of sessions, including “one-shot” classes, may have more difficulty integrating film. That said, brief scenes, many of which are highlighted below, could be shown at the beginning of a session to spark conversation about a specific topic, one that can be addressed in a more restricted time frame. For instance, a clip from a film such as Jason Reitman’s *Thank You for Smoking* can work as an effective segue into a discussion about the importance of evaluating the authority and credibility of information sources and, if time permits, why such evaluation matters in a democratic society. If a clip is selected carefully, students will not need to view the entire film to understand the significance of the excerpt. Moreover, having students write a short, in-class response that asks them to interpret a clip in relation to source evaluation or another relevant issue can help them focus their thoughts for a discussion. If necessary, depending on the goals of the session(s), the librarian

If a clip is selected carefully, students will not need to view the entire film to understand the significance of the excerpt.



can use this discussion to transition into more traditional information literacy topics, from understanding processes of peer review to evaluating information in particular databases. In addition, receptive teaching faculty may not object to having the students view a film prior to a “one-shot” class, especially if the film aligns conceptually with the faculty member’s larger goals for the course. In the end, any information literacy pedagogy that addresses political concerns and contexts, especially if film is employed, will depend on how much the librarian values this approach in contrast to traditional instruction and, more importantly, how well this approach suits the learning objectives of the library’s information literacy program and the course in question.²⁰ The following discussion, therefore, demonstrates how cinematic narratives might be used to promote critical thinking about the purpose and value of information literacy in a larger political context, regardless of the instructional scenario.

Information as Political Rhetoric: Jason Reitman’s *Thank You for Smoking*

Jason Reitman’s *Thank You for Smoking*, a satire of the Washington cigarette lobby, focuses on master rhetorician and Academy of Tobacco Studies Vice President Nick Naylor’s (played by Aaron Eckhart) attempts to reignite the popularity of tobacco products. Blurring potential distinctions between legitimate information and biased political rhetoric, the film seems to undermine the goals of information literacy by suggesting that there is no difference between more reliable and less reliable information, that reliability depends only on one’s ability to make a convincing argument, however suspect it might be. As a result, *Thank You for Smoking* becomes an effective means of teaching students that all information is subject to bias and ambiguity, promoting, albeit in an ironic manner, critical engagement with information. Its setting provides a political context for information literacy and intimates that, in the absence of critical inquiry, people become victims of forces that seek to manipulate and control them through rhetoric and the dissemination of questionable “facts.”

Throughout the film, Nick presents himself as the ultimate political spin artist, his rhetorical effectiveness matched only by what he calls his “moral flexibility”—that is, his ability to put ethical considerations aside in defending the tobacco industry.²¹ Nick

proudly notes his own lack of expertise—“I don’t have a medical degree or a law degree”—and touts a scientist working for big tobacco who remains unable to establish a connection between cancer and cigarettes after years of research.²² In this way, the film invites us to look closely at how bias shapes the information we receive. Nick is a self-proclaimed non-expert, yet he is on national television portraying himself as a

***Thank You for Smoking* presents information literacy as a form of political and social engagement that has real consequences for our lives.**

knowledgeable advocate of tobacco. Similarly, the scientist, despite his apparent expertise, produces dubious research because that is what he has been hired to do. Information, then, carries with it a political charge, and even the so-called experts have a vested interest in selling a particular point of view. The inevitable subjectivity of information



necessitates a critical stance, an approach to information that many librarians would define as being information literate. Also, given the tobacco example utilized in the film, it is clear that a failure to scrutinize information could have major ramifications for our health and well-being, not simply our ability to write “A” papers with properly cited sources. *Thank You for Smoking* presents information literacy as a form of political and social engagement that has real consequences for our lives.

Expressly advocating the kind of critical engagement that librarians value, Nick actually becomes an information literacy instructor of sorts. During a visit to his son Joey’s (played by Cameron Bright) grade school class, when confronted by a girl whose mother told her that “cigarettes kill,” Nick responds, “Is your mommy a doctor? A scientific researcher of some kind? She doesn’t exactly sound like a credible expert now, does she?”²³ Like a librarian’s evil twin, Nick introduces the young students to the importance of evaluating sources—finding out where information comes from and determining its trustworthiness. However, as Nick puts it, in an ironic challenge to the very idea of credibility, “When someone tries to act like some sort of an expert, you can respond, ‘Who says?’”²⁴ After a confused student questions whether “cigarettes are good for you,” Nick tells the students to “challenge authority” and “find out for yourself” about the possible dangers of tobacco products.²⁵

In one respect, Nick encourages the students to adopt what Elmborg terms a “critical consciousness about information” by problematizing the concept of a “single, knowable reality.”²⁶ Effective researchers familiarize themselves with a range of perspectives on the “reality” of a situation or phenomenon and evaluate information critically to arrive at conclusions for themselves. In essence, such researchers are always asking, as Nick does, “Who says?” On the other hand, Nick’s goal is not really to enlighten the students but to manipulate them for political reasons, to color what would seem to be obvious truths with shades of ambiguity. In Nick’s cynical conception of information literacy, all facts are equally uncertain, and all claims to authority (presumably including his own) are performances. Within this framework, locating reliable information would appear to be impossible. How can the students find out for themselves, as Nick suggests, if all sources are equally problematic, if no one is an expert? The irony is that, despite his unethical motivations, Nick rightly challenges the students’ assumptions about knowledge and expertise, advocating appropriate critical practices that realize the fundamental goals of information literacy. He creates ambiguity to serve his own ends, yet this ambiguity is something that students must confront in the research process and in their everyday lives as they develop critical consciousness.

As the film progresses, Nick offers further instruction during conversations with his son, encouraging Joey to interrogate the information he receives from authority figures. As a father, Nick carries out Elmborg’s pedagogy of critical information literacy, whereby “students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and to the world around them.”²⁷ However, in telling Joey, “If you argue correctly, you’re never wrong,” Nick suggests that it is acceptable to present information in manipulative ways.²⁸ For students, Nick’s assertions could be the basis for a discussion or writing assignment about how politics shape information, often in an unethical manner, and how we must determine what to trust or believe. Such a discussion allows for serious critical thinking, shifting



the focus from evaluating a source's reliability to examining the political and rhetorical aspects of reliability itself. Nick views reliability as a construct; its foundations lie not in the validity or completeness of the information but in the seductiveness of the argument. While they do not typically express it in these terms, most librarians understand, much like Nick, that critical information literacy involves rhetorical analysis, the examination of a given source's persuasive strategies and ideological components. Nick's cavalier attitude regarding the use of rhetoric to dupe others into trusting what one knows is false or unreliable, however, suggests that we are under no obligation to use information responsibly. Debating the soundness of this claim, as well as its social and ethical implications, can be a productive activity in the classroom. In fact, the film's lack of clear-cut answers to critical questions makes it all the more useful pedagogically.

In this regard, Reitman's film also poses questions about the relationship between political power and information literacy, demonstrating how those with vast economic resources and greater social status exert the most control over the information universe. Characters such as the Captain (played by Robert Duvall), a mysterious tobacco tycoon; Jeff Megall (played by Rob Lowe), a creepy Hollywood agent; and Senator Ortolan Finistire (played by William H. Macy), a crusader against cigarettes, work actively to shape information for their own interests. For instance, denying his culpability in a plot to promote smoking in movies, Megall extols the virtues of what librarians might think of as critical information literacy: "Whatever information [about smoking] there is exists. It's out there. People will decide for themselves. And they should. It's not my role to decide for them. It'd be morally presumptuous."²⁹ The irony in Jeff's statement is that, even as it advocates critical analysis and individual freedom, it elides the moral choice he is making in his planned efforts to send out misleading messages through the influential medium of film. Through Megall and other figures, Reitman facilitates an interrogation of the political structure and its potentially disturbing effects on the information we must make sense of on a daily basis.

Even in its final sequences, the film refuses to resolve political and ethical issues surrounding information and rhetoric. After being poisoned by kidnappers with nicotine patches, Nick almost dies, and he trusts his physician's claim that he can never smoke again.³⁰ In this moment, Nick must confront realities about his health that cannot be explained away through rhetoric, and he accepts his diagnosis because it comes from an authorized expert. At the same time, despite Nick's acquiescence to legitimate science, he remains committed to big tobacco and prone to specious argumentation. Testifying against a new warning label, Nick tells Senator Finistire, "We don't need warnings for things people already know."³¹ The debatable accuracy of this statement is less significant than Nick's complicity with the tobacco industry's efforts to mislead the public. He argues for personal responsibility yet subverts people's attempts to be responsible. Nevertheless, Nick has taught his son to think critically, giving him the necessary foundations for developing effective information literacy skills and engaging in democratic society. The ethical problems with Nick's own behavior remain open to question, but the film makes it clear that our ability to make choices depends on our ability to interpret information, which depends, in turn, on our ability to think critically about rhetoric, bias, and the dynamics of power. *Thank You for Smoking*, therefore, provides a context for political engagement in the information literacy classroom.



Unknowable Networks: Joel and Ethan Coen's *Burn after Reading*

Joel and Ethan Coen's absurd *Burn after Reading* is difficult to take seriously; but, like *Thank You for Smoking*, it has significant potential to engage students with the political aspects of information literacy. The plot concerns two employees of Hard Bodies gym in Washington, D.C., Linda Litzke (played by Frances McDormand) and Chad Feldheimer (played by Brad Pitt), and their discovery of a disk that they wrongly believe contains high-level U.S. intelligence. In reality, the disk contains bitter former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst Osbourne Cox's (played by John Malkovich) financial information as well as fragments from his unfinished memoir. Linda and Chad's inane attempts

As things spiral out of control, *Burn after Reading* becomes a satire of information literacy and the political information networks that dictate what can be known and by whom.

to obtain a reward for the return of the disk ultimately result in the senseless deaths of several people, including Chad, and confusion among top government officials. As things spiral out of control, *Burn after Reading* becomes a satire of information literacy and the political information networks that dictate what can be known and by whom.

Outsiders to the intelligence community and lacking critical skills, Linda and Chad are ignorant of the context for the information they have found and are, therefore, unable to assess its actual value within a political power structure they do not understand. As representatives of this structure, the unnamed CIA officials in the film treat individual lives with disinterest and are only concerned with maintaining the façade of an effective organization. They fail to engage critically with the information they collect and see little value in it as a pathway to enlightenment. Thus, the Coens offer a subtle critique, through not-so-subtle comedy, of a society in which information literacy appears unachievable, where people and institutions are defined by a destructive combination of powerlessness and carelessness. If *Thank You for Smoking* emphasizes the individual's development of critical information literacy as a means of countering the shady rhetoric of public figures, then *Burn after Reading* focuses more on the larger system, mapping individuals within a political context that circumscribes and hinders information literacy activities. The film reflects Elmborg's systematic approach to information literacy, which "involves the comprehension of an entire system of thought and the ways that information flows in that system" as well as "the capacity to critically evaluate the system itself."³² While their characters cannot adequately understand the information networks that they are caught up in, the Coens give the audience a broader view, facilitating the critical evaluation of a ridiculous, morally questionable, and occasionally deadly system.

Burn after Reading opens with a satellite view of Earth, the camera gradually zooming in on CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.³³ The vast global landscape becomes a metaphor for an exceedingly complex and perhaps incomprehensible network of political information; and the CIA, an organization presumably responsible for bringing order to this network, becomes a mere blip on the screen. Within the Coens' world, all organizations, even the CIA, are subject to larger contexts and frameworks that cannot

be mastered. This idea is exemplified in the opening scene, when Osbourne Cox quits his job as an analyst after being demoted for his alleged alcoholism. Contrasting the professional and rational demeanor of the other agents with Cox's profane ranting, the Coens suggest that chaos lurks beneath the orderly surface of the CIA. In addition, despite his apparent status, Cox has not been privy to certain information about his own position in the network. Ironically, the information expert does not have access to pertinent information about himself; he is out of the organizational information loop. In this scene, the Coens begin developing a geography of disorder that renders information literacy, as the supposedly empowering mastery of information, ridiculous and ineffectual. Even Cox's fellow agents, in their aloof manner, evoke the disconnectedness of bureaucratic compartmentalization rather than the kind of holistic awareness of information that reflects "the comprehension of an entire system of thought."³⁴ The Coens mock the liberatory possibilities of information literacy in a political setting, wherein government officials either cannot access important information or have drained it of its larger power and significance.

The Coens continue to explore these ideas throughout the film, as Linda and Chad futilely attempt to extort money from Cox with a disk containing essentially worthless information. Although the two characters sense importance in the strange mix of Cox's financial figures and CIA memories, they do not understand the context that gives this information meaning; and, thus, they misinterpret its value. According to Williams and Zenger, "Having the literacy skills to read and write but not the wisdom of education to correctly interpret and evaluate," what they call "incomplete literacy," is generally a bigger problem for film characters than total illiteracy.³⁵ This assertion about cinematic representations of traditional literacy also applies to representations of information literacy in a film such as *Burn after Reading*. Chad can read the disk's files and even meet the information need of determining Cox's identity by calling on a friend's computer expertise, but his inattention to context and failure to think critically suggest that his information literacy is incomplete or inadequate.

As a result of their inadequate information literacy skills, as well as their position outside the intelligence hierarchy, Chad and Linda divorce the disk from its proper context, making its contents useless. The narrative surrounding these two might be utilized to discuss with students the importance of context in analyzing sources, as the characters' ineffective approach to information underscores the need not only to understand a source's purpose and intended audience but also its relationship to the larger world of information. Linda and Chad fail to consider the limits of their own knowledge and perspective, jumping to conclusions based on faulty assumptions. If Linda and Chad had considered how the disk might fit into a larger context, they may have averted catastrophe. Instead, Chad is accidentally shot and killed in a fruitless attempt to steal more valuable information from Cox's home. In the film's political setting, violence and brute force lie just beneath the surface, such that the story of *Burn after Reading* demonstrates something analogous to what Brier and Lebbin call "the hazards and consequences of information illiteracy" or, more accurately, inadequate information literacy.³⁶

The last few scenes in *Burn after Reading* provide a sort of meta-commentary on the film as a whole, linking the small-scale disaster instigated by Linda and Chad's unethical behavior and poor information literacy skills with the large-scale political structure that



delineates and controls information. This structure is represented by CIA headquarters, where anonymous officials must figure out how to resolve the situation created by the other characters. However, much like Cox in the opening scene, these ostensible information experts cannot make sense of what is going on. They have collected data about the events and the people involved, yet, because they have not had access to the complete picture of the system afforded the audience, the officials cannot meet their information need. As the top official (played by J. K. Simmons) puts it, "So, we don't really know what anyone is after."³⁷ Again, the Coens suggest that information literacy, within the convoluted political system we all find ourselves, may be unachievable, even for those in a central position of power. There are simply too many disconnected fragments, too much information to evaluate. In response to an underling's confession that he does not know what they have learned, the top official cannot provide a useful answer.³⁸ This moment reflects a political version of the philosophical "unknowability" that, according to R. Barton Palmer, pervades *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), an earlier Coen brothers' film.³⁹ The implication for information literacy is that our information seeking may never lead to enlightenment, a proposition worth debating with students because it suggests there may be no way to transform the political structure through critical consciousness.

Then again, the self-serving CIA of *Burn after Reading* ultimately has no interest in understanding what has occurred and why; the callous officials only want to cover their tracks so as not to appear incompetent. The top official even tells his subordinate to burn Chad's body and withhold information from other federal agencies, and he is pleased to learn that Cox is brain dead at the end of the film.⁴⁰ More significant in regard to information literacy, however, is the fact that the officials fail to ask truly critical questions, to seek understanding from the information they have, and continue the search. Thus, despite their emphasis on inadequate information literacy and the limits of knowability, the Coens bring stagnant and inhumane political structures into focus on screen, the very structures that critical information literacy explores and critiques. From this vantage point, *Burn after Reading* becomes what Brabazon might think of as a compelling pedagogical "thinking space,"⁴¹ fostering conversations about the political structures and contexts that play a dynamic and often constraining role in how information is accessed and used.

The Uncritical Decider: Oliver Stone's *W*.

Controversial filmmaker Oliver Stone is no stranger to the intersection of politics and information literacy. Accusations that Stone willfully misinforms the public through distortions of the historical record in heavy-handed films such as *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995) have been well documented.⁴² Despite these accusations, some commentators assert that Stone is actually a kind of information literacy advocate, asking his audience by way of interrogations of accepted truths to question authority and interpret evidence for themselves. Michael Medhurst, for example, suggests that *JFK* encourages viewers to adopt a process of critical inquiry.⁴³ For his part, Stone explicitly encourages his audience to engage in critical research, speaking with pride about times when young people meet him and "mutter embarrassed things like, 'Your movie...made me want to go back



and read more about everything that happened back then. I even went to the library (or bought books) and I learned a lot.”⁴⁴ Stone clearly sees himself as a success if he can per-

Stone clearly sees himself as a success if he can persuade audience members to seek out and analyze information (at the library, no less).

sue audience members to seek out and analyze information (at the library, no less). Taking the point further and sounding much like an information literacy instructor, Stone

says, “There’s some ‘truth’ everywhere in everything, but you’ve got to dig for it and sew it together from contradictions. As a historian or a dramatist, what you really need is an intellect that’s capable of absorbing contrary points of view, perhaps as many as half a dozen versions of this thing called ‘the truth.’”⁴⁵ Most librarians could not express the goals of information literacy instruction—to encourage students to search for information from a range of conflicting viewpoints, analyze that information critically, and develop well-considered conclusions—any more eloquently.

Stone’s recent film about President George W. Bush, simply titled *W.*, is more straightforward and less confusing than Stone’s most infamous political films, including *JFK* and *Nixon*. Its biographical narrative follows a non-chronological but uncomplicated path, alternating between the story of Bush’s (played by Josh Brolin) early adult life and entry into politics and the story of his later push for war in Iraq. In spite of its relative simplicity, however, the film indicates that Stone remains interested in issues relevant to critical information literacy and the relationship between information and politics. Examined from this perspective, *W.* becomes a relevant companion piece to *Thank You for Smoking* and *Burn after Reading*. Like Reitman, Stone demonstrates that information is contaminated by biased political rhetoric; and, like the Coens, Stone brings to light the power structures underlying information access and use. Of primary interest, however, is the way Stone provides a model of ineffective critical information literacy via George W. Bush.

In Stone’s vision, Bush, despite utilizing information to manipulate the public, resists the kind of critical engagement with information that should characterize the information literate individual. This resistance, marked in part by Bush’s unwillingness to consider multiple perspectives and to evaluate fully the information presented to him, eventually leads to public disaster and private isolation, even as the president insists on his ability to function as the “decider.”⁴⁶ In contrast, Stone provides two models for effective critical information literacy: Secretary of State Colin Powell (played by Jeffrey Wright) and, appropriately enough, librarian Laura Welch, later Laura Bush (played by Elizabeth Banks). Although these characters are, in many respects, rendered powerless by the constraints of the political system and their own personal flaws, Stone nevertheless utilizes them to illuminate the political dimensions of information literacy and the challenges that must be surmounted in order to transform critical thinking about information into positive action. By presenting and implicitly critiquing various models of information literacy practice in a political setting, Stone not only reaffirms the value of critical information literacy in the world outside the classroom but also foregrounds the severe consequences of an uncritical and unethical approach to information.



The narrative of *W.* centers on political information literacy and the politicization of information itself from the start, as Bush meets with Powell, Dick Cheney (played by Richard Dreyfuss), and other advisors to discuss a reference to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea in the upcoming 2002 State of the Union address. In theory, a speech of this sort is intended to inform the public, to convey information about a threatening reality. Yet, in *W.*, information, rather than simply describing reality, constructs a version of reality, something Paul Wolfowitz (played by Dennis Boutsikaris) understands well when he suggests that the infamous phrase “axis of evil” will help in “educating the public about the size of this war and its implications.”⁴⁷ By drawing attention to the fact that “axis of evil” could have been left out of the speech or replaced with another phrase with different implications, the film shows how information is tainted by politics and how government officials present information in manipulative ways to advance their agendas, deceiving the public as they ostensibly “educate.” *W.* defines information in the political world as problematically biased and potentially harmful—any boundaries that might exist between information and misinformation begin to blur. It is within this politically charged context—one that mirrors Nick Naylor’s world of rhetorically malleable truth and thus emphasizes the need for citizens to evaluate information critically—that *W.* takes place.

This scene also makes it clear that *W.* can be read as a story about Bush’s inadequate information literacy. When Powell, as a voice of critical reflection, raises objections to Bush’s “preemptive posture” and notes the difficulty of “planning out three fully operational wars with three countries,” the president quickly dismisses the secretary of state’s legitimate concerns because they might impede the push for war, even though Powell’s information might also help him make a better decision.⁴⁸ Failing to consider the implications of relevant information, Bush listens only to those advisors who already agree with him, however unsubstantiated or unjustly biased their claims might be. Information, which expert advisors are paid to provide, only counts for Bush if it matches his current vision of the world; yet, his job as president is to make decisions based on a comprehensive, not selective, assessment of available information. The problem is that Bush sees the war as a foregone conclusion, not one option among many. Rather than learning more about security threats or using information to anticipate the consequences of his actions, Bush rushes into disaster.

The pattern that emerges in terms of Bush’s lack of critical scrutiny and dismissive attitude toward unpleasant information continues throughout *W.* For example, over lunch at the Oval Office, Cheney tells Bush that, “according to *our* sources,” there is a “90 percent” chance that Saddam Hussein has nuclear weapons; the vice president’s pronounced emphasis on the word “our” suggests a myopic approach to information, one that only takes into account sources supporting the predetermined decision to invade.⁴⁹ Unwilling to probe beyond the obviously limited information he has just been given, however, Bush accepts the answer and shows little interest in debating actual evidence. Likewise, at Bush’s Texas ranch, Donald Rumsfeld (played by Scott Glenn) easily convinces the president that smaller troop levels will be sufficient in Iraq. Once again, Bush ignores useful information provided by Powell, who says that, during Desert Storm, they “planned for any possibility” and warns about a potentially problematic aftermath.⁵⁰ Instead of opening the discussion to alternative perspectives, Bush abruptly changes the



subject from serious matters and even his own desire for evidence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to simplistic platitudes about freedom and democracy. Here, Bush is an active agent, in that he is empowered by his status as commander-in-chief to carry out a desired action. However, his refusal to assume command of the available information

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through critical inquiry and to rely, instead, on unquestioned assumptions indicates that Bush lacks the “critical consciousness” that Elmborg associates with “active agents” of information literacy.⁵¹ Like the CIA officials in *Burn after Reading*, Bush engages in illusory critical discussion, a feigned attempt to make sense of information that has no discern-

able effects on the system or individual behavior. In this way, Stone gives librarians a chance to talk with students about the larger purpose of information literacy—to use information from various perspectives to develop one’s thinking and, where appropriate, take action.

Later, during a meeting in which the plans for war are being finalized, Bush silences another critical discussion instigated by Powell. This scene and several others encourage the audience to see Powell, in contrast with Bush, as a proper role model for the information literate political leader. Thus, Stone presents an alternative to Bush’s uncritical mentality. Powell repeatedly interrogates information presented by his colleagues, pointing out that they “need back up” evidence to support suspicious intelligence; and he laments that Bush and his advisors “accept without debate that a preemptive strike on Iraq can defeat terrorism better than police action or intelligence agencies that actually share information.”⁵² Like most librarians, Powell values information access and the critical interpretation of that information to solve problems and shape one’s perspective, whereas Bush repeatedly rejects significant information.

Unfortunately, though Powell is far more interested in what he can learn from information, he eventually succumbs to the president’s wishes and aids in the selling of a questionable war by disseminating unreliable and selective information. Stone suggests that critical information literacy, if divorced from moral conviction that transcends political expediency, will not bring about positive results for society. In a classroom setting, Powell’s actions throughout the film invite critical questions regarding the larger ethical and social concerns involved in the practice of information literacy. What are the moral responsibilities of someone in Powell’s position? In light of the information he possesses about Iraq and Bush’s desire to wage war there, does the secretary of state have an obligation to act on that information and inform the public? Could Powell have stopped Bush’s course of action? If not, why not? These questions are compelling for politically engaged information literacy instruction because they highlight the nefarious political system that challenges information literacy’s efficacy and hinders Powell, even if that system does not excuse his culpability.

Along with Powell, Stone provides a more subtle model for effective critical information literacy in Laura Welch, the woman who eventually marries Bush. Perhaps it is fitting



that Welch is a librarian, as Stone presents her in her early life as an information literate intellectual. When they first meet, Welch tells her future husband that she “admires people who write and read” and advocates education because it “can really make a difference in people’s lives.”⁵³ More significantly, responding to Bush’s one-track conservative attitude as portrayed in the film, she says, “I just think it’s important to see all sides of a situation.”⁵⁴ Reflecting the critical approach to information indicative of what Stone calls “an intellect that’s capable of absorbing contrary points of view,”⁵⁵ Welch’s comment represents a lesson never learned for Bush. In fact, Laura Welch’s transformation into Laura Bush coincides with the virtual disappearance of her critical librarian perspective. As her husband becomes more entrenched in a political world that has no room for diverse points of view, Laura is relegated to a limited role behind the scenes, where her interest in progressive politics seems to have vanished and her advice is dismissed because, in Bush’s words, “politics is not a library.”⁵⁶ Like Powell, Laura Bush yields to the demands of the political system. Librarians might discuss her transformation in the classroom to show how the larger system can thwart our attempts to maintain a critical stance.

Laura Welch’s transformation into Laura Bush coincides with the virtual disappearance of her critical librarian perspective.

Juxtaposing actual footage of Iraq’s descent into violence with scenes of an administration mired in confusion over missing WMDs, Stone draws attention to the consequences, including the human cost, of Bush’s inadequate information literacy. As the world turns ugly, the president becomes increasingly isolated, unable to acknowledge the reality of a disastrous invasion. Mystified, Bush fails to realize that his single-minded approach to information and refusal to engage in comprehensive critical analysis led directly to political and personal catastrophe. Disturbingly, he even seems to be moving on to a new war with typical uninformed conviction, now convinced that Iran has WMDs simply because he “can feel it.”⁵⁷ He has not learned that he must consider multiple perspectives and carefully examine the information available to him, even when it contradicts his instinct. Stone leaves Bush, in the final version of a repeated dream sequence, isolated in an empty stadium.⁵⁸ The film suggests that, without a willingness to engage with information, we are left alone, disconnected from other ideas and other people. For Stone, then, information literacy is a social activity, a practice that brings individuals together through the information they create and interpret. Indeed, failing to engage in critical information literacy has ramifications beyond the individual, a point that *W.* vividly highlights in its portrayal of war and political corruption.

Of course, it is important to emphasize that *W.* reflects Stone’s perspective on Bush and the events of his life, which means the film is itself a form of politicized information inviting critique.⁵⁹ Interestingly, Stone has put great effort into defending his approach to the historical record. The *W.* Web site includes a detailed guide (also available on the DVD release) explaining which aspects of the film were fictionalized and grounding nearly every scene in various sources of historical evidence, including books, government documents, and Web sites.⁶⁰ In conjunction with the film, this guide illustrates not only how information sources are used to construct particular arguments about the past but also how such arguments may be shaped by one’s personal and political point of view. As a result, the guide could be incorporated into an information literacy activity



in which students seek out the film's original sources and analyze Stone's interpretation of the evidence. This seems to be exactly the kind of interactive, dynamic relationship the director attempts to forge with his audience. Although not everyone will agree with Stone's explicitly political agenda, there can be little doubt that *W.* provides thought-provoking opportunities for teaching in the information literacy classroom.

Conclusion

The use of popular films or other popular culture texts in the classroom will not, in itself, lead to political engagement with information or automatically result in the critical consciousness scholars have advocated. Nevertheless, as evidenced by this discussion, librarians who work to integrate relevant films into their instruction can empower students to think critically and reflectively about the political and social dimensions of information literacy. Although the title character of Stone's film argues that "politics is

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not a library,"⁶¹ films such as *Thank You for Smoking*, *Burn after Reading*, and *W.* suggest that information literacy, primarily the province of libraries and librarians, is very much linked to politics. Indeed, more than showing why information literacy is valuable, these films have the potential to broaden

our conceptions of information literacy and the contexts in which information is used. They situate information literacy within a political framework that extends the reach of our instruction, as we, in Brabazon's terms, "use the texts and contexts of our students and provide diverse ways of interpreting and shaping the history, geography and politics around them."⁶² It is through the exploration of such cultural texts and contexts that information literacy becomes truly critical, a form of political action and transformation fostered in the classroom, practiced in the world.

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Notes

1. Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Practice," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, 3 (May 2008): 258.
2. Studies reflecting this approach to film include Kornelia Tancheva, "Recasting the Debate: The Sign of the Library in Popular Culture," *Libraries and Culture* 40, 4 (Fall 2005): 530–46; Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford, "Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian," *Library Quarterly* 73, 1 (January 2003): 54–69.
3. David Barton and Mary Hamilton, "Introduction: Exploring Situated Literacies," in *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, ed. David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.



4. Jacobs, 258.
5. Christine Pawley, "Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling," *Library Quarterly* 73, 4 (October 2003): 448.
6. *Ibid.*, 423.
7. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000), American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm> (accessed March 22, 2010).
8. James Paul Gee, "The New Literacy Studies: From 'Socially Situated' to the Work of the Social," in *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, ed. David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič (London: Routledge, 2000), 180.
9. James Elmborg, "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, 2 (March 2006): 194.
10. Jacobs, 258.
11. *Ibid.*, 260.
12. Dane Ward, "Revisioning Information Literacy for Lifelong Meaning," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, 4 (July 2006): 399.
13. Elizabeth E. G. Friese, "Popular Culture in the School Library: Enhancing Literacies Traditional and New," *School Libraries Worldwide* 14, 2 (July 2008): 77–8.
14. Tara Brabazon, "Thinking Pop Literacies, or Why John Howard Should Read More," *Australian Library Journal* 55, 4 (November 2006): 287.
15. *Ibid.*, 298.
16. See Diane Negra and Walter Metz, "The Gumpification of Academia? Teaching the Ideological Analysis of Popular Film and Television," in *Visual Media and the Humanities: A Pedagogy of Representation*, ed. Kecia Driver McBride (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 230–33; Andrew Light, *Reel Arguments: Film, Philosophy, and Social Criticism* (Boulder: Westview, 2003), 8–9; and Stephen E. Slaner, "The Use of Film as a Teaching Technique to Promote Critical Thinking in the Classroom," *Teaching for Our Times: A Journal of Good Teaching Practice* 1 (1999): 90.
17. Bronwyn T. Williams and Amy A. Zenger, *Popular Culture and Representations of Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 6.
18. *Ibid.*, 14.
19. David J. Brier and Vickery Kaye Lebbin, "Teaching Information Literacy Using the Short Story," *Reference Services Review* 32, 4 (2004): 387.
20. Although beyond the scope of this discussion, a pedagogical framework centered on political engagement with film could conceivably be adapted to online instructional settings as well. Message boards, blogs, or other tools could certainly be used to post assignments and facilitate discussion. In regard to the use of films or film clips, depending on the situation, the librarian may need to work closely with technology and/or copyright specialists on campus to develop an effective and legally compliant learning environment.
21. "Moral Flexibility," *Thank You for Smoking*, DVD, directed by Jason Reitman (Beverly Hills: Twentieth Century Fox, 2006).
22. "Meet Nick Naylor," *Thank You for Smoking*, DVD.
23. "Merchants of Death," *Thank You for Smoking*, DVD.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Elmborg, 198.
27. *Ibid.*, 193.
28. "The Beauty of Argument," *Thank You for Smoking*, DVD.
29. "Hollywood Dream," *Thank You for Smoking*, DVD.
30. "Smoking Saved My Life," *Thank You for Smoking*, DVD.
31. "The Sultan of Spin," *Thank You for Smoking*, DVD.
32. Elmborg, 196.
33. "You're Out," *Burn after Reading*, DVD, directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008).

34. Elmborg, 196.
35. Williams and Zenger, 105.
36. Brier and Lebbin, 384.
37. "Messy and Complicated," *Burn after Reading*, DVD.
38. "What Did We Learn?," *Burn after Reading*, DVD.
39. R. Barton Palmer, "The New Sincerity of Neo-Noir: The Example of *The Man Who Wasn't There*," in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 161.
40. "Messy and Complicated," *Burn after Reading*, DVD; "What Did We Learn?," *Burn after Reading*, DVD.
41. Brabazon, 298.
42. For more information on the controversies associated with Stone, see Bernard von Bothmer, "Oliver Stone's *JFK*: Political Assassination, Kennedy, and Vietnam," *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 17, 1/2 (2005): 242–51; Robert A. Rosenstone, "Oliver Stone as Historian," in *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 26–39.
43. Michael J. Medhurst, "The Rhetorical Structure of Oliver Stone's *JFK*," in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 209.
44. Oliver Stone, "Stone on Stone's Image (as Presented by Some Historians)," in *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 49.
45. *Ibid.*, 55.
46. "Signing Off," *W.*, DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (Santa Monica: Lions Gate Films, 2008).
47. "Hit Them Hard," *W.*, DVD.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. "You Break It, You Own It," *W.*, DVD.
51. Elmborg, 193.
52. "Armed and Dangerous," *W.*, DVD.
53. "Hitting It Off," *W.*, DVD.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Stone, "Stone on Stone's Image," 55.
56. "Under Attack," *W.*, DVD.
57. "WMDs," *W.*, DVD.
58. "Facing the Media," *W.*, DVD.
59. In its representation of the title character as an arrogant and uncritical leader, *W.* clearly reveals Stone's personal disdain for the real Bush, which the director has expressed on a number of occasions in the popular media. A characteristic example is Stone's description of Bush as a shallow person "with limited interests intellectually." See Scott Tobias, "Interview: Oliver Stone," *The A.V. Club* (October 16, 2008), <http://www.avclub.com/articles/oliver-stone,14318/> (accessed March 22, 2010).
60. David Wyles, "W.: The Official Film Guide" (2008), <http://www.wthefilm.com/guide/> (accessed March 22, 2010).
61. "Under Attack," *W.*, DVD.
62. Brabazon, 299.